The Canary in the Mine

Anti-Black Violence and the Paradox of Brazilian Democracy

by CHRISTEN A. SMITH

THE BRAZILIAN political crisis of 2016 has sent shockwaves through the nation. Brazil's first female president, Dilma Rousseff, has been accused of corruption and is facing impeachment proceedings. Millions of Brazilians have demonstrated in the streets against the government, and millions have demonstrated against impeachment, contending that the plot to remove Rousseff from office is in fact a coup. At the heart of it all is the question of democracy—what are its parameters in Brazil today, who has access to it, and why?

After more than two decades of military dictoatorship that began with a coup in 1964, Brazil officially transitioned to a new democracy in 1985, ratifying a constitution in 1988 that afforded broad-sweeping rights. According to the Brazilian constitution, discrimination based on age, race, gender, disability, religion, sexuality, political affiliation, and national origin are all illegal. One of its fundamental principles is to "Promote the good of all, without prejudice as to origin, race, sex, color, age and any other forms of discrimination." Yet the 1988 constitution's multicultural progressive discourse is in tension with vestiges of authoritarianism that still haunt the nation-state, specifically the repressive practices of the police. Brazil's rhetorical invocation of multicultural democracy is contradicted by its treatment of the most marginalized in society. The violent policing of working-class Black Brazilians is evidence of this fact.

Black Death and Policing

On the evening of Friday, April 8, 2016, Military Police invaded Jardim Paiva 2, a working-class neighborhood in the municipality of Ribeirão Preto, northeastern region of the state of São Paulo. There, they confronted Luana Barbosa dos Reis, age 34, who was taking her 14-year-old son to his computer class on her motorbike. They approached Luana and ordered her off her bike. Once she complied, they aggressively demanded that she open her legs and stand with her hands behind her head against a wall—standard gendered protocol for stopping and frisking *men* in Brazil. Luana protested, insisting that she was a woman and should not be forced to submit to a search in this manner, as standard Brazilian police procedure does not require it for women. However, because Luana was a lesbian who preferred to dress in a masculine style, the officers refused to comply with her request. Instead, they responded violently, kicking and punching her brutally and repeatedly. After she was beaten, Luana was arrested and taken to the local police precinct. There, she was questioned. Although she was visibly debilitated and in great pain, the police officers required Luana to sign a sworn statement stating that her injuries had been her fault because she had attacked two police officers. Luana's family picked her up and took her home. She suffered a stroke and a brain contusion due to her injuries and died ten days later.

At the Third (Inter)national March Against Genocide of Black People, in Salvador, Bahia, August 24, 2015.

Photo by Lena Azevedo

There is a disconnect between the rights Brazil's democracy promises and the rights that Brazilians experience in their everyday lives. While all Brazilians have enjoyed political citizenship since 1985, the state, both directly and indirectly, has denied many citizens civil citizenship, better defined as social rights (Dagnino 1994; Holston and Caldeira 1998). However, this failure is more complex than a simple disconnect between citizenship rights and social actualities. Being Black and living at the margins of poverty, like Luana, puts you at constant risk of losing your life. Not only do Black Brazilians not enjoy full civil rights, one can argue that Black Brazilians are not even considered human by the practice of the law.

According to Amnesty International Brazil, approximately 82 youth are killed in Brazil every day, and 77 percent of those young people are Black (Roque 2014). The police are responsible for a significant portion of these killings. According to official records (kept reluctantly and inconsistently by police departments), between 2009 and 2014 the Brazilian police killed 11,197 people—approximately six per day (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2013). However, most police killings are not classified as homicides. Instead, they are classified as "suicides"—*autos de resistência*—death caused by resisting arrest. Like Luana, the victims are made to declare that they are responsible for their own assassination, leading us to conclude that many of the Black youth who die by homicide every day in Brazil, die at the hands of police.

Police violence is one of the many vestiges of authoritarianism that continue to haunt the Brazilian nation-state long after the end of the military regime. During the dictatorship, the military regime organized special operations police forces to fight "urban guerillas" and patrol poor urban neighborhoods—monitoring the "internal enemy" (Pinheiro 1991). This "enemy" included society's "marginal" people (*marginais*)—criminals such as thieves, vagrants, and prostitutes. However, it also included the *povão*, the poor, majority-Black masses. Brazil's police forces were in fact created, in part, to patrol and control the enslaved African population during the colonial period (Araújo 1997). Some of the earliest accounts of brutal police torture in Brazil tell of police officers raiding *quilombos* (runaway slave encampments) in the hills of Rio de Janeiro in the early nineteenth century (Holloway 1993). This culture of anti-Black policing continued through time, intensifying during the military dictatorship.

After the end of the dictatorship, Brazil was reorganized into a new democracy. Yet this new democracy continued to require the militarization of police forces in all states. Today, the same war strategies that defined policing under the military regime continue to inform the logic of racialized, gendered policing in Brazil—eliminating the "internal enemy." The story of Luana Barbosa exemplifies this culture. A police massacre in the Bahia neighborhood of Cabula does as well.

In the early morning hours of February 6, 2015, police officers from the Rondas Especiais da Bahia (RONDESP), a special unit of the Bahian Military Police akin to a SWAT team, invaded the Vila Moisés community in the Cabula neighborhood of Salvador, Bahia, killing twelve young Black men ages 16 to 27, and wounding six others. The incident, which came to be known as the Cabula Massacre, was one of the most deadly and controversial police killings in Salvador's recent history. But the perversity of the killings extended beyond the immediate circumstances into the strange and twisted story that emerged with it. Shortly after the shootings, RONDESP released a statement claiming that their officers had been involved in a shootout with criminals hoarding arms and paraphernalia, who were planning to rob a bank. The governor of Bahia, Rui Costa (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT), praised RONDESP, likening the shootings to strategic offense in a soccer game. This incident was not a case of rogue cops using excessive force. Not only were the police actions excessive, they were also predatory, and the state was complicit in, if not responsible for, orchestrating RONDESP's actions.

The governor's deeply disconcerting defense of excessive police violence demonstrated the state's complicity. Shortly after Costa made his remarks, more details of the Cabula Massacre came to light. Witnesses testified that the police did not get into a gunfight with criminals. Rather, they deliberately invaded the neighborhood before dawn, rounded up a group of approximately 18 young men, took them to a remote location, tortured them, killed 12, and wounded six. The subsequent coroner's report confirmed that the 12 had been tortured and executed.

RONDESP is one of Bahia's many special forces squads whose structure is a holdover

Photo by Lena Azevedo

Hamilton Borges dos Santos of Reaja walks in the 2015 march against genocide in Salvador, Bahia.

from the military dictatorship. Its actions in Cabula are exemplary of the disjuncture between the radically progressive guarantees of the 1988 constitution and the state's explicit policies of anti-Black policing. Instead of protecting all citizens, the police often act as a death squad (Azevedo 2013a, b). Embedded within Brazil's democracy are remnants of slavery, colonialism, and authoritarianism that the nation does not seem to be able to shake.

The Fight Against Anti-Black Police Violence

In 2005, one year into President Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva's (Workers' Party, PT) first presidency, Black organizers in Salvador, Bahia, inaugurated Campanha Reaja ou Será Mort@! (React or Die!/React or Be Killed! Campaign). The explicit purpose of React or Die! was to speak out against the unchecked killing of Black people by the police, including police raids and death squad murders. The emergence of the campaign was evidence that anti-Black violence in Brazil had not abated significantly since the end of the authoritarian regime. React or Die! was inspired by an initiative of the 1970s Unified Black Movement (Movimento Negro Unificado) to "react against racial violence" (Reaja à Violência Racial), developed at the height of the military dictatorship in response to intense anti-Black police violence across the nation. In 2005, twenty years after the transition to democracy, Black organizers found themselves in a similar position, with the threat of police violence increasing.

Ten years after Reaja's founding, on March 20, 2015, co-founder Hamilton Borges dos Santos testified against the Brazilian government at a hearing conducted by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IAHRC) on the death rate of Black youth in Brazil. Cabula was the principal study he cited when he unequivocally accused the Brazilian state of anti-Black genocide, claiming that both the federal government and state governments were responsible for killing Black youth, and that state-sponsored programs like Juventude Viva (Youth Alive) were mere band-aids that masked the state's role in the violence.

I have been collaborating with the React or Die! Campaign since its inception, through my research on the impact of police violence on Black Brazilians and the Black community's response to it. In my recent book, *Afro-Paradise: Blackness, Violence, and Performance in Brazil* (2016), I argue that there is a paradoxical relationship between Bahia's international image as an exotic, Black, jovial playland where anyone, especially tourists, can enjoy Black culture and Black people, and the state's use of terror against the very Black bodies that ostensibly produce this exotic space.

However, afro-paradise is a framework that we can employ beyond the state of Bahia. There is a paradoxical relationship between state-sponsored anti-Black, anti-woman, anti-LGBTQ police violence and Brazil's projection of itself as a multicultural liberal democracy. The Brazilian state writ large violates the very bodies that it employs to define itself as progressive and inclusive. This disavowal undermines the structural integrity of the nation as a progressive state, leading to fissures and breaks. The tension between police violence and the multicultural democratic ideal has weakened Brazilian democracy, priming the nation for a swing back toward authoritarianism—the current political crisis.

Vestiges of Authoritarianism: Brazil's Political Crisis and the Police State

In the past fourteen years under the Workers' Party mandate, Brazil has, without question, dramatically reduced gender, racial, and class inequality. From the implementation of affirmative action policies in federal universities, to the establishment of the Secretariat of Racial Equality (SEPPIR), the creation of the Bolsa Família conditional cash transfer program, and the establishment and expansion of the Maria da Penha Law protecting women from domestic abuse, the Workers' Party has made significant, undeniable advances in the fight against inequality. However, the nation has also witnessed an unprecedented rise in violent police repression and lethality during this same period, especially toward Black Brazilians. Corruption is not the only cancer undermining the structural integrity of Brazilian democracy.

As Brazil's government swings back to the right with the impeachment hearings against Rousseff, the populations most vulnerable to these political changes continue to be those at the margins. Black working-class Brazilians are the canaries in the mine, their deaths the harbinger of the political chaos that has come. ✹

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